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MUSIC WHICH TELLS STORIES.*

THE best known of Beethoven's works is the "Moonlight Sonata." Why? He himself did not regard it as one of his most inspired works, and it is safe to say that among his thirty-two sonatas for pianoforte there are more than a dozen which deserve the same popularity, but have never had it. The title alone gave the "Moonlight" its advantage over the other sonatas; and this title was not Beethoven's own, but was suggested by a German critic; nor is it appropriate to the whole sonata, but only to the first movement.

It took the musical world centuries to fully grasp the significance of the fact so graphically illustrated by that word "Moonlight." Until about a century ago it seldom occurred to the composer of a piece of music to attempt anything more than to simply weave tones into beautiful fabrics of diverse patterns. The idea of suggesting pictures or of telling stories was as foreign to his mind as to that of a lace-maker. The sporadic cases in which such things were attempted were regarded as more or less puerile and opposed to the true nature of the art. But gradually one composer after another succumbed to the temptation of overstepping what used to be considered the "legitimate boundaries of music." Concerning Haydn, one of his biographers tells us that he sometimes "imagined a little romance which might furnish him with musical sentiments and color." While Beethoven did not write his most popular sonata with the idea of a moonlit night in his mind, it is known that he did for some years entertain a plan of bringing out a new edition of his works in which the poetic ideas underlying the sonatas and symphonies would be indicated. That he was, however, still intimidated by the old prejudice against pictorial music is proved by the fact that, after writing the Pastoral Symphony, which depicts, according to his own words, a scene by a brook, the merry-making of peasants, a thunder-storm, and the joyful feelings after the storm, he became alarmed, and wrote that this work was intended to be "more an expression of feeling than painting"—an attitude as cowardly as it was inconsistent.

This "hedging," however, did not destroy the effect of Beethoven's example in writing a piece of genuine programme

* "Stories of Symphonic Music." By Lawrence Gilman. New York and London: Harper & Brothers.

music. By this example the shy and conservative Mendelssohn was encouraged to follow in his footsteps. Nay, it seems the very irony of fate that he, who was so long the leader of the conservatives, should ultimately have achieved his greatest triumphs in this kind of music. The most poetic and original of all his works are the "Scotch" and "Italian" symphonies, the "Hebrides" and "Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage" overtures, and the "Midsummer Night's Dream," all of which are programme music. Schumann had a way of attaching poetic titles to his pieces after they were written. Then Berlioz and Liszt gradually came to the front with new methods, and finally there remained hardly a composer who did not pay his tribute. As Mr. Ernest Newman has said: "One has only to take up a catalogue of the Russian, French, German, Belgian, American or even English music published during the last twenty years to see how enormously this form of art has grown, and how *the really big men all display a marked liking for it.*"

This triumph of programme music is emphasized by the appearance of Mr. Gilman's "Stories of Symphonic Music." It is devoted entirely to symphonies, overtures and tone-poems which have a story, as distinguished from the so-called "absolute" music which has no alliance with any poetic or pictorial subject; and a glance at its table of contents tells more eloquently than Mr. Newman's catalogue of the important place descriptive music now holds in our concert-halls. Here we find classic and romantic masters like Beethoven, Spohr, Mendelssohn, Schumann, side by side with the more audacious Berlioz and Liszt, not to speak of the unspeakable Richard Strauss and the much-maligned Debussy. France is particularly well represented in the list; for besides Berlioz and Debussy we find in it Bizet, Charpentier, Chausson, Dukas, Franck, d'Indy and Saint-Saëns. Germany contributes, besides Strauss and the four classic and romantic composers just named, Goldmark, Raff, Wagner and Hugo Wolf. Here are also the Bohemians, Dvorák and Smetana; the Norwegian, Grieg; the Russians, Glazounoff, Rimsky-Korsakoff. Tchaikoffsky; the Swiss, Huber; the Hungarian, Liszt; the Finnish, Sibelius. England contributes Bantock and Elgar, while America is represented by Chadwick, Converse, Hadley, Loeffler and MacDowell.

One may accuse Mr. Gilman of sins of omission. It would

have been well, not only for patriotic reasons, to include John K. Paine, with his "Spring" symphony, his "Tempest," his "Island Fantasy." To be sure, these are now seldom played, but the same is true of some of the Converse pieces included, or of Hadley's "Salome"; and we are convinced that Paine will live. Nor was it fair to exclude Rubinstein's glorious "Ocean" symphony, which contains enough musical ozone to preserve it another century. Mr. Gilman might retort that Rubinstein did not suggest a definite story, and this is true, so far as the score is concerned; but he told an American admirer (Mr. Upton) that the headings for the different movements, if he had wanted to make use of them, would have been as follows: "First Movement, wind and water; Adagio, an evening on the ocean; Scherzo, dance of Tritons and Naiads; while the idea of a triumphal procession of Neptune and his attendants underlies the finale." Concerning the supplementary movements the composer added, facetiously: "I am trying to get on dry land again."

Rubinstein was, like Mendelssohn, a conservative; and the fact that he, too, did his best work when he left the "absolute" style, so dear to conservatives, to write programme music is another feather in the cap of this species of the tonal art. Professor Niecks, of Edinburgh, goes so far as to claim even Johannes Brahms, the king of the conservatives, as a composer of programme music. He does not make out a strong case; but programme music comes out on top even if Brahms be looked on as an exception. The rule is proved by the fact that no other prominent composer of his time, or of the present day, has written absolute music only.

The change in the attitude of the masters toward programme music is a matter of much greater importance than appears at first sight. It concerns not only the subject matter of instrumental works, but their form also. Before Liszt, composers wrote symphonies in four detached movements which were evolved from march and dance rhythms—"idealized dance forms" they are called by the theorists. Liszt created the symphonic poem, the form of which is conditioned by the development of a poetic idea or story, instead of by the contrast of slow or lively dance measures. And in the words of Wagner: "Is the march or dance, with all the thoughts accompanying this act, a more worthy source of form than, *e. g.*, the idea of the principal and most

characteristic features in the actions and sufferings of an Orpheus, a Prometheus, etc?" The modern composers have answered this question with a decided "No," by writing their melodies and harmonies with growing predilection in the form created by Liszt, and happily named by him symphonic poem. Of the composers represented in Mr. Gilman's book, sixteen contribute symphonic poems; and he might have added to the list indefinitely by including the names of minor writers. The advantages of the symphonic poem over the symphony were too great to be overlooked. Liszt showed his colleagues not only how to give organic unity to a whole symphonic work, but he emancipated orchestral music from its monotonous pattern of allegro, adagio, scherzo, allegro, and gave it the charm of endless variety by making the form in each case adapt itself to the poetic idea, or story, which forms the subject.

Mr. Gilman fortunately has not indulged in speculative interpretations of his own regarding the poetic content of the works included in his volume. He has taken his information from the scores and prefaces of the composers and other reliable sources. He has also entirely avoided that technical analysis which is always foolish because it is intelligible only to those who do not need it. The information contained in his volume really ought to be printed in the programmes distributed in the concert-halls; for if the picture or the poem imagined by the composer was an aid and advantage to him, it must be so to the hearer. But, in the first place, few concert-givers can go to the expense of printing a long story about each piece played; and, in the second place, it is not wise to attempt to read a programme while the concert is going on; it is too suggestive of the proverbial Englishman on the Rhine who is so intent on reading his Baedeker that he misses the scenery. One should prepare for a concert, as one does for an opera, by reading the libretto beforehand. Many are too indolent to do this, and are punished by getting only half the pleasure they might have enjoyed. Heretofore, concert-goers have been dependent on uncertain programmes for the necessary information concerning the stories of symphonic music; now they can find all this brought together in a well-indexed volume of 359 pages, which is one of Mr. Gilman's most useful and readable contributions to musical literature.

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